

# Not Shy

## Ancient Greek women: many roles

**NEW YORK - A woman's place has never been just in the home -- not even in ancient Greece. The proof is in an exhibit titled "Worshipping Women: Ritual and Reality in Classical Athens" -- a collection of artifacts that corrects the cliched idea of Athenian women as passive, homebound nurturers of men and children.**

In the display covering Greek life, art and religion, women play important, vibrant roles, as do their goddesses -- from lover to priestess to political peacemaker to protagonist of public festivals.

"Today's woman has more in common with the woman of ancient Athens than one imagines," said curator Stella Chryssoulaki. She pointed to a vase showing a group of women who escaped city life, getting together in the countryside for a three-day festival honoring their beloved god Dionysius. They talked and shared lots of wine, leaving their husbands behind. Contrary to the popular perception of the Athenian female rituals as wild orgies, "there was no sex." It was a religious rite, but also "a way to get out of the house and talk and exchange feelings," Chryssoulaki said. "It was kind of like group therapy -- and then they went home relaxed and ready for the stresses of daily life." Resentful husbands gave these gatherings a bad name, but actually Dionysius "was a gentle god, both somewhat masculine and feminine," she said.

The 155 artifacts illuminated in cases and on pedestals in the Manhattan exhibit are mostly from Greece, with contributions from the Vatican, Russia's Hermitage Museum, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and other top art sources in Italy and Germany.

Just steps from Fifth Avenue, "Worshipping Women" is located in the Onassis Cultural Center in the basement of a modern Manhattan skyscraper,

Olympic Tower, that on a higher floor houses the American offices of the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation. It is named after the son of the late Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, who was married to Jacqueline Kennedy; his son and heir, Alexander, had died young in a plane crash.

The center's mission is to promote Hellenic culture, and it sponsors exhibitions in the underground gallery such as "Worshipping Women," which opened in December and will run through May 9. The show was conceived by Nikolaos Kaltsas, director of the National Archaeological Museum of Greece in Athens, and Alan Shapiro, professor of archaeology at Johns Hopkins University.

Although women in Athens couldn't vote and were told whom to marry, the exhibit is packed with objects that attest to their vital roles in everything from food and sex to birth and death.

Women were part of both politics and religion.

A large earthen vessel depicts a scene from Homer's "Iliad" in which a Trojan priestess receives Greek warriors who had come to recover Helen from Troy. "The priestess secures the peace," said the curator. A key depicted on another vase was kept only by a woman who opened the door to the treasures in the temple of the priestesses.

A small, bronze statuette of Athena shows her as armed and dangerous, leading Athens' warriors against Troy. And on a black vase, she's a thinker, etching words onto the waxen surface of a "laptop" notebook with a sharp wooden stick that served as a writing tool. A tiny vase to be filled with wine for ritual tastings could be carried by a girl.

"Women in Athens, were they invisible?" asked Chryssoulaki. "No!"

Greek myths, with all their blood and guts, are not for the faint of heart -- and neither are parts of this exhibit.

Athena, the goddess of wisdom, came from the brain of her father, Zeus. And Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, was born when Uranus was



*A Greek amphora from about 460 B.C. depicts Athena, the powerful goddess of wisdom and war.*

castrated by his son, who pitched his severed genitals into the sea. From the turbulence -- "aphros" means sea foam in Greek -- arose the erotic Aphrodite. She became both the lover and surrogate mother of the god Adonis, whom she shared with the goddess Persephone.

The mythical births of Athena and Aphrodite have real meaning to the modern mind: as a battle of emotion vs. intellect. "Myths were a way to see human life," concluded Chryssoulaki.

In the exhibit, life is also reflected in sculptures and such tiny objects as a ritual bowl that a woman who baked bread for a living donated to a temple -- representing about 10 percent of her meager income. Her name is noted on the bowl.

"You see, even poor, ordinary women left a mark, they played a role -- and they were part of the life of the gods," said Chryssoulaki.

## Activists stage demonstration to call for release of Nicolaides

The Cyprus Action Network of America (CANA) has formally contacted the International Secretariat of Amnesty International to request that the case of our ethnic Greek brother, Australian-Cypriot, Harry Nicolaides, who is unjustly imprisoned in Thailand for merely writing a book that criticized the King of Thailand, or for exercising his right to freedom of expression, be adopted as an Amnesty International 'prisoner of conscience'.

Just this past Thursday, January 29, 2009, Hellenic-American activists staged a small vigil demonstration outside the Royal Thai Consulate in New York City, in coming weeks, we will also seek the cooperation of like-minded communities concerned with human rights in Thailand to join our letter writing campaign, and demonstrate in solidarity with us outside the Royal Thai Consulate in New York City and the Thai Embassy in Washington DC to call for the unconditional release of Harry Nicolaides.

Activism on behalf of our ethnic Greek brothers who are imprisoned anywhere in the world is also imperative toward breaking down the barriers that separate us as a people in the homeland and in the Diaspora. None of us may know Harry Nicolaides personally, nor do we know his belief system, nor his family. We are mobilizing because of the

need to free Harry Nicolaides and to begin a new movement of solidarity and concern for our Hellenic brothers and sisters, regardless of ideology, citizenship, personal belief systems, or language abilities.

Our people for too long have been victim to a slave mentality inherited from the Ottoman past, that makes some of us strike out at our own brothers and sisters, sometimes this takes the form of egoism, materialism, personal opportunism and political party loyalty. Other times its sheer cruelty and misguided anger.

Regardless of where we are born, and how well we speak Greek, if at all, we are

all obligated to help each other, and this case will be a good start toward ending the prejudices of i.e. the prejudices of Mainland Greeks who view Diaspora Greeks as lower than them, for not speaking the Greek they speak, or the bias of Mainland Greeks we have seen toward Cypriot Greeks, or toward Greeks from anywhere outside the temporary political border of today's Greece. We march for the welfare of our ethnic Greek brothers who have been wronged anywhere in the world -- regardless of ideology, citizenship, personal belief systems, or language abilities.

Ethnic Greek activist Ioannis Fidanakis has compiled a list of petitions, news articles, and you tube videos that include interviews with Harry Nicolaides' Greek-Cypriot mother and father, all filling in more background to the case, available on his blog Enotitan Revolution:

<http://enocism.blogspot.com/2009/01/free-harry-nicolaides.html>

